WHO SETS THE CONDITIONS?
CONDITIONALITY, RECIPROCITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND INCLUSION IN SOCIETY.

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Who sets the conditions for conditional cash transfers (CCTs)? The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) reflect governments’ concerns about national and international economic and social development policies, whose interests are primarily those of national integration into world trade. Their indicators aim at a healthy and educated labour force earning enough to raise national economic statistics. But who knows if a dollar or two a day per head is enough to meet people’s needs in any specific social context? Why is valuable work identified only as waged employment? Arguments about conditionality in cash transfer policies to achieve MDGs rarely address prior problematic issues, so I want briefly to mention two among many, the meanings of conditionality and reciprocity, and the categorical implications of human rights to the means for social inclusion.

The question of power to choose one method of combating poverty and deprivation as against others must be faced openly. Whose definition of the problem is it? In any concrete instance and not merely in theory, how far has the target poor population taken part in agreeing conditions that penalise non-compliance with government policies? Are the costs and benefits to them consistent with their own social value system and respectful towards their modes of life and conception of human dignity? The question is not just whether CCTs improve levels of living for people in poverty in ways they approve, but also whether they accept the sanctions as appropriate when conditions are not met. For example, why should any child be deprived of essential resources because a targeted family member fails to meet behavioural conditions to which parents have not consented? These questions are just as
pertinent to social assistance administration in older welfare states as they are to nations more actively affected by MDGs. To pose questions like these is not only to emphasise the universal human rights aspect, but also to query who should have the right to demand conditionality, the individual whose human rights have not been met by the government, or a government whose social and economic development goals may be in the interests of the ruling elites rather than of the people whose needs have not been met.

Selective CCTs are only a very small part of the universe of reciprocal exchanges and interactions which inherently constitute societies and through which their members recognise common interdependence. Commercial trade relations and waged employment, the epitome of success for the MDGs, are no more than a special and abstracted form of exchange, and most interactive social exchanges (think daily human relations, trust and collaboration) occur outside the cash market. Most human societies consider it culpably deviant to bring money values into essential human relations, yet most power holders and policy makers unquestioningly accept the dominance of abstract economic market theorising over recognition of complex social reality. Thus they believe that poor people must be threatened with less money to incentivise them (as in CCTs) and rich people must be given more (as in bankers’ bonuses), instead of asking poor people or bankers what matters to them. What evidence there is suggests that, when talking as humans, they all strive for personal recognition and respect in society, for which money is no more than a limited material proxy in the absence of the feeling of inclusion, the social glue holding society together.

Reciprocity takes many forms, but in every exchange one can identify a prestation and its counter-prestation, the obligatory response it requires. Some prestations are specific (cash for goods, services for cash) synchronic exchanges, but others are diffuse and/or diachronic, for example within families, where the prestation may be parents’ care for children in the reciprocal expectation of care in old age. But the key to understanding the meaning of every exchange is the order of the transaction — who gives the status-enhancing prestation and who has the obligation to respond equivalently? Equal exchanges mutually reinforce recognition and relationships, but failure to respond appropriately is demeaning. Claiming social security benefits does not damage status, since the claimant’s contribution has previously established the right to benefit. But begging is the opposite because it is the donor who establishes the right and the recipient who is demeaned by the inability to respond with equal value. In charitable transactions the obligation falls on the recipient to conform to the donor’s expectations and conditions, otherwise philanthropy is abused.
From poor people’s perspective, CCTs representing benefits towards government goals may thus be highly problematic in specific local social context. The MDGs for extreme poverty and hunger are aggregated statistical indicators averaging national extremes of wealth and poverty, of elite affluence and mass deprivation, totally unrelated to individual human rights to standards of living adequate for health and well-being. UNDHR article 25 and ICESCR article 11 describe unconditional individual rights irrespective of national averages, deservingness or anything but humanity. Similarly, there are contradictions in promoting collective averages as goals for global social development (MDGs) combined with economic individualism as the means to activate individuals to achieve targets (CCTs), and in recognising (at least in principle) categorical individual human rights to social welfare but rejecting the corresponding government duty to offer supply-side structural solutions to social problems which cannot be met by demand-side behavioural economic incentives.

In this intellectual incoherence and obfuscation rationalising much governmental policy implementation, the question of whose interests are served by policies which reinforce the inferior status of poor people (as CCTs do) tends to be suppressed, particularly because they are given no voice in such discussions. They have a categorical human right both to an adequate income and to education and health care, so what entitles governments to make one conditional on the other, or to prioritise one kind of reciprocal exchange over other equally valid ones? What evidence is there that the vagaries of fluctuating global economic market demand for cash crops or products (the basis for much of their wage labour) offers people reliable guarantees of the whole range of adequate resources for their rights to decent living and social inclusion in ways appropriate to their specific societies? That, after all, is what development means from the perspective of ordinary people who want, for instance, clean water supplies and not inadequate and unreliable wages to pay privatised water charges. The equivocal CCT evidence from South Africa, where human rights are constitutionally embedded, suggests that conditionalities could be played both ways — ‘give us our rights or take the democratic consequences’. But in countries where political democracy remains fractured or underdeveloped, true development towards social inclusion for all must start with the active participation and voice of people in poverty in decisions on the right means for satisfying their needs. If conditional penalties of deprivation of essential income, education or health services are not among the means they themselves choose for development, then governments should not include them among social policies to achieve the MDGs.